

II Preparing young students for music reading

"To be concerned with kindergarten and its music is not a minor pedagogical matter, but the very building of a nation" Zoltán Kodály

Children learn most naturally through their senses (see article I). Music reading and theory, which are apparently very rational subjects, can be taught in such a way that children develop their intuition and are led to discover the concepts for themselves. In this way, we allow the child to be free to learn, without putting up barriers, or putting obstacles in their way. Let me give you an example: a child who has been introduced to the staff reciting this note is C, this is D, this is E, etc. will always look at music and think "What is the name of that note?" This is not reading music. A good reader sees the pattern on the page, hears the sound and plays. A child who has been introduced to rhythm with a mathematical explanation of the length of each note, will look at the rhythm and start to count. This is not reading the rhythm. Rhythm reading is seeing, feeling, then performing.

In this article, I will demonstrate how students can be introduced to music reading and theory in a natural way, allowing them to absorb and assimilate before giving rational explanations. The goal is that the student, looking at the written score, will not start to think and count, but rather will be able to hear and perform the music.

I will describe possible ways of doing this, presenting ideas for some activities that could be done throughout the study of Book One to prepare the student for music reading in Book Two. Many more ideas will come to you once you start to work in this way.

This article is about preparing the child for music reading. It is not about how to teach reading! Children coming out of this preparation stage will not be able immediately to sight-read music they have not heard, but they will be ready to start working on that. They will have developed a way of approaching music reading. They will see and try to hear!

The very beginning

The teacher's first focus must be to talk with the parent, so that the parent understands the importance of playing the Suzuki repertoire in the home. We must make sure that the child has the repertoire in her ears. The student will absorb a variety of melodies, rhythms and harmonies through the ear by hearing the recordings of the Book One repertoire. This is important because when the child is asked to read music, the ear will lead the way. The ear will recognize familiar patterns. The child will play music, not just notes, as she has already developed a musical sense. This is exactly parallel to language learning. When a child is learning to read her language, she is recognizing written symbols for sounds already in her ear. Learning to read is recalling sounds that have already been fed into the ear. The Suzuki Book One student, therefore, starts off with very good preparation.

Next, the child must be able to play this repertoire well with free and natural use of the body. The body learns to follow what is in the ear. Also, the melodic, rhythmic and harmonic patterns become part of the child's physical memory. The body learns how to produce a good tone, and how to maintain good body balance and play with ease. Basic concepts such as legato, staccato, melodic and rhythmic sense, are completely internalized. When the child starts to read she will automatically play with the same free use of the body to produce good tone, good rhythm, legato and

staccato.

Parallel with teaching this repertoire, we must teach the children their finger numbers, and the names of the notes on the keyboard. (Please note, however, that I do not teach the music by singing the note names. I want the students to relate the sound in the ear to a pattern on the keys, without thinking "what note is it?") These are necessary preparation steps for music reading, and can be easily integrated into the teaching of Book One.

Once the repertoire is in the ear and the student can play a number of melodies well, it is time to start introducing pre-reading activities. I feel that at this point in the child's development it would be premature to jump straight into music reading at the instrument; if we wait, however, until Book Two, it could be too late. This is why it is important to lay a solid foundation for music reading in Book One with a reading preparation program.

Don't teach, just let the children learn!

We have to consider the vast preparation a child has in language before actually learning to read. Young children are surrounded by the written word long before they "officially" learn to read. Children in preschool hang up their jackets beside their name although they cannot yet read. In kindergarten classrooms words and letters are bouncing off the walls! In language, the best readers are those who have been read to, who have been surrounded by books and story tapes. Children love to hear the same story over and over again. As the parent reads to the child, the child is very aware of the written word, although she is not reading. She is absorbing everything!

In language learning, children have the sound of the language in their ear, and then develop the ability to speak. However, from the beginning the child is also surrounded by the written language. We just expose the children to it, without us doing anything. This is very important. When we read to a child, we don't hide the words she is not ready for. The child sees and hears everything and learns by absorbing. This is an extremely important part of the learning process and is often neglected. We tend to think that learning starts with teaching facts. This is wrong! The most important learning takes place when the child is absorbing through their senses. This is how children learn best. When they learn to read they are reading words they have had in their ear and as part of their experience for a long time.

We have to provide the children with the same kind of preparation for music reading. Let us consider the Suzuki student's experience. At the beginning, when we are introducing the child to the repertoire at the piano, we are always showing the parents the written score. This is important. Without any complicated explanation, the child understands that the music she is playing has a written form. Little by little the child will start to look at the book, point to the pieces and say "I know how to play this one, and this one, and now I'm learning this one". The written music is related to the familiar sounds in a very natural way.

Then, once the student is able to play a few of the pieces, we can start to expose more directly the student to its written form.

The best way to start is by using the repertoire the student knows so well!

Using the Suzuki repertoire I will describe how I use the Suzuki repertoire to prepare the student for music reading. Please remember, this is repertoire the student already has in her ear, and can already play well.

I have the melodies written with enlarged notation on flashcards, including the staff, the clef, the tempo markings, the dynamic markings, repeat signs etc. Each card contains one measure. I choose a piece that is already very well known to the student. I take first of all just one phrase of a piece. Laying the cards on the floor, I point and sing (I sing "lu lu" without using the note names), gradually adding more cards. I encourage the student to sing with me, then let her point to the notes while I sing. Gradually I add the remaining phrases. Without explaining anything, the student will absorb the written symbols, always relating the symbols to the sound. This is incredibly important! We must train the student to see music and hear!

This activity can have many variations. The teacher sings, the student points; the student sings, the teacher points; the student sings and points, the teacher sings and points, each one taking one phrase. I prefer to start with singing activities so that the student is relating a symbol to a sound, not to a note on the keyboard, or to a finger!

A later activity could be the teacher playing the piano and the student pointing to the written notes. Also the teacher can play, and when the teacher stops the student has to indicate where it is in the written music. Once the student has confidence, the teacher can present the student with the cards jumbled up, perhaps one phrase at a time, and ask the student to sort it out. Always sing with the student, so that she is constantly relating the sound to the symbol, and never just performing a theoretical exercise.

In this way we can gradually expose the student to the written form of all the melodies in Book One.

From the very first of these experiences, the student will succeed because the process is natural and gradual. She will never make a mistake with the rhythm as it is already in her ear. She will be motivated to participate as the melodies are like old friends to her. We are exposing the child to the written symbols for music that is very familiar. It is incredible to observe just how much a student assimilates in this way. I have pointed to the repeat sign, and asked, "What is that?" Without having received any explanation, the student said, "It means repeat". Of course the student knew the music had to repeat as she had it in her ear and had played it many times.

This is preparing the student for music reading in a most natural way. Just by exposing her to the written language for sounds and concepts already in the ear.

Introducing the Staff

Singing is very important preparation for music reading. Singing with young children lets them absorb music through their whole body and, as Kodaly affirmed, singing touches a part of the soul not reached by any other means. Once the Suzuki students have the Book One repertoire in their ear, it is excellent to sing with them. I don't mean singing using solfege, but just singing just using a neutral syllable (I use "lu lu").

Once the student has played and sung several melodies, I introduce them to the staff. After playing Lightly Row, Little Playmates and Allegretto 2, the student has the pattern of the first five notes of the major scale thoroughly in her ear. I just sing this five-note ascending pattern, and show it to the student by moving a note on the magnetic board, starting on middle C. I don't sing the note names as I don't want the student to think of the name of the note at this point. I just want the student to

hear a pattern and see it. I then sing it again and guide the student to move the note on the staff. The student is hearing an ascending step-wise pattern, and tracing its shape on the board. Later I will do the same with the descending pattern. I want the student to understand the overall concept, not learn individual notes.

The way we introduce melodic reading is very important. We are establishing thinking patterns. Once patterns have been established it is very difficult to change them. This is why it is essential to establish correct learning patterns from the beginning.

I continue with a variety of activities with the magnetic board. Once the ascending and descending pattern has been established, I start to vary it. Perhaps singing a three-note ascending pattern, and then descending, asking the student to follow by moving the note. This is actually melodic dictation! Another variation would be to add a repeated note. It is best to do many of these activities singing before going to the piano. In this way, the student is associating a written pattern with the sound of a melodic pattern, and not with notes on the piano or finger numbers.

Later, I add the concept of 3rds. I just sing the ascending five-note pattern, and then descend by 3rds and guide the student to follow. This is a familiar pattern (Allegretto One), so once again the student is seeing the symbol for something she already has firmly in her ear. If the student has had her ear well developed this concept should not be difficult to grasp.

At about the same time I start to "write" familiar melodies for the student to identify. Again using the magnetic board, I sing and indicate the notes for Mary had a Little Lamb. The first part of the song is only moving by step, and then it has one leap of a third. Then maybe I will sing and ask the student to write, of course with my guidance, if that is necessary. On a later occasion, I will just show the student the notes without singing and ask what song it is. This is developing inner hearing in the student; a very important ability for all musicians. I do the same with the first part of Little Playmates, Allegretto 2, Aunt Rhody, and Long Long Ago. It is easier to identify pieces that start with step-wise movement. Later activities could then include such pieces as Cuckoo, and Lightly Row, training the student to hear the 3rds.

Once again, the goal is that the student, on seeing a melodic pattern, will hear it, or at least have an idea of how it sounds.

Introducing basic rhythmic concepts

Once the student can play a number of melodies well, with accurate rhythm, I start asking her to sing and write the rhythms of certain songs. I choose the repertoire very carefully to ensure that the student will be successful. I present the activity by first singing and writing myself, providing the example, and then asking the student to continue. I begin with stick notation.

It is good to start with Twinkle Twinkle Little Star, because it consists of only quarter notes and half notes, and has the same rhythmic phrase repeated six times. I sing the first phrase, writing the stick notation as I sing, then I hand the student the pen and ask her to continue. I always sing to guide her. Without any explanation of what a quarter note or half note is, the student will not have trouble with this, as the rhythm is so firmly in the ear. The same activity can be done many times over the course of several lessons, until it is thoroughly internalized. At this point, I introduce the rhythm of Lightly Row in the same way. Of course, Lightly

Row has the same two rhythmic elements as Twinkle Twinkle Little Star: the quarter note and the half note.

Next, I show the student the rhythm for Aunt Rhody. I sing and write the first part, and then ask the student to continue. Here the student is again working with just two rhythmic elements, the quarter note and the eighth note. It is possible to use the syllables ta titi as an aide. Following this, I do the same with the first part of Long Long Ago and Little Playmates.

Another activity is to present the student with the written rhythm and ask the student to inner hear it and identify it. Excellent preparation for this is to ask the student to think of a song then to inner hear the melody while clapping the rhythm. Another child, or the mother could then try to identify the song.

Little by little, with a lot of repetition, other note values can gradually be added. Once again, the objective is that the student relates what she hears to what she sees, and vice versa. The student is recognizing one note value as it relates to another, in the context of a very well known and thoroughly internalized rhythm. At this point, there is no need to explain the difference between beat and rhythm, or how many beats there are in a measure. Just let the student hear, sing and write.

Musical terminology

Little by little, in a natural way, I introduce the correct musical terminology such as measure, phrase, bar line, double bar, repeat sign, treble and bass clef. For instance, once we have the cards laid out on the floor in four phrases, I say to the student, "You do the first phrase" as I point to it. The student has had no previous explanation of the terminology, but has the music thoroughly internalized and feels the phrases. Now it is just a matter of putting a label to what she already "knows" with her whole body. The student understands what a phrase is. In the same way, I ask a young student who has picked up the cards of a certain phrase, "How many measures do you have?" Of course, the student naturally counts the number of cards!

Gradually, I relate what we are doing to the book itself. For instance, after discovering the treble clef by tracing it with our fingers on the magnetic board, we look in Book One to see if there are any treble clefs there. After following a song in large notation on the floor, at some point we go to the piano with the Book One. I play the song and the student follows.

Final thoughts

I have given you general ideas about how the Suzuki students can be prepared for music reading while studying in Book One, using the repertoire they already know. Anything we teach must be carefully sequenced, with each step preparing the student for future success. These ideas have come to me in part by working backwards. After seeing the trouble my students had with music reading, I realized the fault was not theirs, but mine. I had taken a giant leap and was asking them to do something they were unprepared for.

The teacher's manner is of the utmost importance. Our enthusiasm, interest, and sense of fun are contagious! Also, we must have a well thought out approach. Every activity should be presented step by step. We must build on successful experiences. Find a way to present the activity with the minimum amount of explanation. Just do it! Teach by example. Whatever you want the student to do,

just do it first yourself.

As Suzuki teachers, we have been asked to research how to introduce the child to music in a natural way; by hearing and being surrounded by music, then learning to play a repertoire that is already internalized. We have studied carefully the importance of a nurturing environment in the child's natural development. We have also been searching for the most flexible and easy use of the body, so that the student can learn to play without tension. Now we must expand our research to include the most natural approach to music reading. In the same way as learning to play an instrument, learning to read and understand the written score is a gradual process. I think we have made the mistake of neglecting the very beginning portion of that process. I believe the secret lies in this all important preparation period.

Let us think about a successful reading program in school. It is one in which the child smoothly passes from one stage to another without realizing they are learning or studying. Like walking through the woods. You enter not knowing how to read. You enjoy the beautiful scenery and are totally involved in the experience, and when the path takes you out into the open countryside, you find you can read. When I ask my daughter how she learned to read at school, she responds "No, at my school they don't teach you how to read". At that moment I know it is an excellent school because she is an excellent reader!

We must study and find a truly "Suzuki" approach to music reading. At this point I would like to acknowledge that the inspiration for many of the ideas I have presented here has come from my studies of the methodology of the Hungarian composer and educator, Zoltan Kodaly. Kodaly and Suzuki have so much in common; they both advocate that music should be taught first to the ear, and that the intellect should be addressed later.

There are still more aspects to take into consideration: how to incorporate such concepts as transposition, rhythmic and melodic patterns in unknown contexts, the teaching of harmony, and how the development of harmonic thinking prepares the student for reading with fluency and understanding. Like the previous concepts, the foundation is laid in Book One.

All the activities described in this article form part of a reading preparation program. When the child has knowledge of basic musical terminology and can successfully follow a score of well known music, write and recognize in written form familiar melodic and rhythmic patterns, identify her finger numbers and the notes on the keyboard, she is ready to start reading! This music reading preparation period is similar to a language reading readiness program in pre-school and Kindergarten. The child is surrounded by familiar letters and words, is read to, traces, and begins to read and write. The child also is exposed to the written texts for many well-known stories and songs.

After this preparation, I decide what reading books to use, depending on the student's age. I carefully study the particular reading method to see what the student must know in order to be successful with the first reading experience. Usually the book will begin with step-wise motion, and quarter and half notes. The student who has successfully performed the suggested preparation activities will be ready to read this. I see what clef and what note the first exercises begin with, and make sure the student can locate this note on the keyboard before I give her the reading book. I choose a reading series in which there are several books for each level. I give the student 5 or 6 books to work in, giving specific assignments in each. Each book reinforces the same basic concept. Little by little I teach the

names of the notes on the staff, and the correct terminology for the different note values. With ample preparation, this is not a giant leap for the student, but just another step in a gradual, natural process.

I would like to end with a quote from an article written by Kodaly. The article is entitled "Who is a Good Musician". Kodaly begins by quoting Robert Schumann, who emphasizes the importance of ear development in the understanding of the written score:

A good musician sees with his ear and hears with his eye

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